

Military Pledge to Saigon Is Denied by Eisenhower

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 17—Former President Dwight D. Eisenhower demurred gently today at President Johnson's frequent suggestion that United States military actions in Vietnam were the consequence of a Republican commitment given 11 years ago.

Although asserting strongly at a news conference that "The Communists must be stopped in Vietnam," Mr. Eisenhower denied that he had ever given a unilateral military commitment to the Government of South Vietnam. His Administration saw no need for such a commitment in 1954, he said, and was offering aid, not "military programs."

General Eisenhower's statement appeared to be a mild objection to President Johnson's interpretation of a letter he wrote to Ngo Dinh Diem, then the President of South Vietnam, in October, 1954. The disagreement is significant because of the continuing debate about whether the United States must fight in Vietnam to keep its "word" and "honor."

Letter Often Quoted

President Johnson contends that he feels compelled to honor the commitments given not only by his Democratic predecessor, President Kennedy, but also by General Eisenhower. The President has often cited and quoted from the 1954 letter as evidence.

Last June, for instance, Mr. Johnson read the entire letter at a news conference and then remarked: "In the case of Vietnam, our commitment today is just the same as the commitment made by President Eisenhower to President Diem in 1954—a commitment to help these people help themselves."

When asked about the letter today, Mr. Eisenhower said: "We said we would help that country. We were not talking about military programs, but foreign aid."

The former President said "there was no commitment given in a military context, except that as a part of SEATO." This was a reference to a pro-

ocol appended to the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty in September, 1954, extending the treaty's protective provisions to Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam, which were not eligible to sign.

Letter Expressed Concern

Laos and Cambodia have since described themselves as neutral, outside the pro-Western treaty arrangement. The United States' program of massive military assistance to South Vietnam was undertaken in 1961 without application to SEATO, apparently because Washington was unable to obtain the then necessary unanimous support of the other members—Britain, France, Pakistan, New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines and Thailand.

Mr. Eisenhower's letter to President Diem spoke of Washington's grave concern about the future of South Vietnam in the face of enemies without and within. He was therefore offering aid, Mr. Eisenhower wrote, "to assist the Government of Vietnam in developing and maintaining a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means."

The main emphasis of the Eisenhower letter was upon "needed reforms" and "standards of performance" that the United States expected in return for its aid. The former President said he hoped the Diem Government would be "so responsive to the nationalist aspirations of its people, so enlightened in purpose and effective in performance" that it would be respected by friends and foes alike.

The general view here is that the Diem Government failed in its later years to meet those standards, a failure that is

thought to have contributed to its overthrow in 1963.

In talking with reporters after a meeting this morning with House Republican leaders, Mr. Eisenhower said that he had received intimate briefings on Vietnam and that it would be unwise for him to discuss the specific situation at the moment. But he said that if the Communists are not stopped in Vietnam, "it would be harder and tougher to try it somewhere else."

Letter Explained

This afternoon, after meeting with Republican Senators, he was asked about the meaning of the 1954 letter. "At the time," he replied, "we did not see the need for a major military effort in Vietnam."

It was after the overthrow of Mr. Diem and eight or nine subsequent governments, he added, that the United States found itself where it is today. He did not say whether he blamed the Kennedy Administration for contributing to Mr. Diem's downfall.

Administration officials, meanwhile, reported today that Edward G. Lansdale, a retired Air Force general with extensive experience in Asia, would leave for Vietnam next week to become a special assistant to the new United States Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge.

As a colonel on the joint United States military advisory group in the Philippines 15 years ago, he won recognition for his energetic but unorthodox contributions to the defeat of Communist Huk rebels. Later, he served for three years in Vietnam, as a friend and adviser of President Diem.

Mr. Lodge met the general two years ago and apparently was impressed by his belief that military action against guerrillas was useless unless enhanced by political economic programs insuring safety to the South Vietnamese people.

General Lansdale is known as an individualist who believes in personal action free of the more customary bureaucratic restraints, a method of operation often attributed also to Mr. Lodge.